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Ms. Gendered: An Educator's Journey Devising a Children's Play about Gender Identity

By Karen M. Dabney

Abstract

In the era of the coronavirus pandemic, I found myself starting a new teaching position at a state university. Almost immediately, I was leading the devising process for a children's show titled *Squiggles* that would be filmed and streamed online. The target age range for our audience was 4-9 years old. Narrowing down an array of social justice issues, the ensemble opted to focus their original production on gender identity. Utilizing assorted generative and improvisatory techniques, we set out to create a show about embracing one's identity, accepting each other's differences, and managing heavy and hurtful feelings. Our cast of four explored moment work, image theater, Rasaboxes, short form improv games, and more to develop characters and scenes to illustrate the struggles with mental well-being one goes through when accepting one's true self. Little did I realize how my own childhood experiences with gender misidentification would inform my directing process.

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Like so many academic theater programs at the start of summer 2020, I participated in emergency season planning meetings with my future colleagues; before I even moved to my new institution's state, before we had any time to get to know each other (visible and invisible identities included). Our faculty determined that the school's annual tradition of bussing in students from local schools, grades pre-K through 3rd, to campus in Spring 2021 for back-to-back matinee performances would not be feasible due to Covid-19 safety protocols. Given the adjustments needed to film the production, I suggested delaying the purchase of performance rights for the children's play selected prior to my hire. Instead, I proposed the possibility of devising a piece of youth theater loosely aimed at issues of social justice. This would allow our college students the opportunity to address our nation's volatile increase in harmful rhetoric, not to mention police brutality, that accompanied the then-pending presidential election. My brand-new colleagues were fully supportive of this notion, even though I learned later in the school year that the department had never included a devised work as part of its official Theatre season.

By the fall, I was asked for a show title and blurb to use for audition announcements. Knowing that the devising project would ultimately find its theme in rehearsals, I did my best to find a suitable title and description that could apply to a variety of theatrical outcomes. The initial metaphor that popped into my head entailed the art of doodling. Abstract, random creations made without intention that could be interpreted many ways,

wherein beauty and imaginative stories could be seen. *Squiggles* was pitched to auditioning student actors thusly:

An original play created by [our university] students geared towards youth, grades pre-K to 3, about the struggles to fit in, to stand out, and to find inspiration within ourselves. In a collaborative process, the ensemble will work together to explore these challenges we've all faced through original collages, monologues, scenes, and songs. We use the metaphor of the nonsensical squiggle to guide our search for and celebration of the imperfectly perfect in us all.

Auditions were held at the start of the Spring 2021 semester, where actors were asked to create an original 60-second performance inspired by an impactful moment in their lives. These performances were lovely, at various levels of vulnerability and creativity, but most telling was my brief conversation with each actor afterwards where I was able to determine each student's genuine interest in performing children's theater, the process of devising, and a true collaboration free of ego. Despite casting conflicts with other spring shows, I was delighted to have a strong cast of four dedicated performers.

We began our rehearsal process a few days after casting. Typically, I would have preferred to create and perform a devised work in a smaller, experimental venue (which our university had). Due to Covid-19 safety protocols, however, the faculty opted to utilize the proscenium theater for rehearsals and filming. Everyone was masked, did their best to maintain social distance, wearing vinyl gloves whenever handling shared objects, and utilizing cleaning supplies including hand sanitizer regularly. Every day, the stage management team taped large swaths of butcher paper up on the proscenium walls alongside large crayon boxes as tools for recording our ongoing generative process.

Our very loose guidepost for *Squiggles* fell under the umbrella of social justice. For day one, I brought in two dozen children's books on various issues of identity, power, and privilege as potential source material. Topics included race, gender, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and the environment. We did an activity where the actors rotated through various positions on the stage where the piles of books lay. The actors were tasked with picking one randomly, quickly glancing at the title and cover art, and improvising a character and/or monologue based on that instantaneously digested information. After a couple rounds of this activity, they were then allowed to open the books and read only the page they happened to land on; again, creating characters or moments inspired by the limited source material. Next, I gathered the ensemble to listen and watch as I read them one of the books, recreating fond memories of story time on the carpet. Actively listening and relying on the book's artwork and the narrator's vocal dynamism for more detail helped the actors reconnect with the magical power of storytelling and note what may draw a reader into the tale. These early, spontaneous evocations for the ensemble were impactful, and as a result, we were able to pull many valuable initial ideas for topics and characters. At the end of day one, the cast was asked to take a book home to read in its entirety, creating a mini-monologue motivated by that story to be performed on day two.

On days two and three, we began rehearsals by interviewing the children of several faculty members via Zoom who happened to fall into the age range of our target audience. These conversations were loosely structured, allowing the ensemble to observe and digest the ways in which the children spoke, moved, and engaged with us as dynamic, youthful storytellers. De-briefs with the ensemble afterwards included a flurry of inspiration based on the kids' stories, use of language, and, most especially, self-awareness and intentionality as small humans. It

immediately ignited in the cast a focus on treating our target audience as fully thinking and present individuals who deserved honest storytelling, not babying nor belittling.

Throughout week one, we used techniques from *Moment Work: Tectonic Theater Project's Process of Devising Theater* (2018) by Moisés Kaufman and Barbara Pitts McAdams to explore a random assortment of props and costume accessories to create moments, characters, and eventually dialogue. The ensemble would observe an individual actor's moment, then work together to find a title for each piece created. The next layer was to have performers layer multiple characters and/or moments together into a single new piece, followed by the group labelling the offering. With the next layer, I asked actors to adopt and perform characters or moments initially created by other cast members to encourage and remind the cast that this was truly an ensemble creation. These applications of performance were not only entertaining but also informative, as the originators of characters and moments gained insight into how their vocal, physical, and emotional choices were perceived within their reinterpretations. Later in the week, the actors worked in pairs and as a full ensemble of four to combine several different moments and characters to find even more ways to possibly launch stories.

Though a variety of social justice issues were explored during week one, the natural energy of the ensemble veered towards gender identity. One of the cast members who identified as transgender male generated multiple moments and characters which impacted and motivated the creative team to make gender identity the primary focus of our devising project. The other three ensemble members identified as cisgender, while the entire ensemble had dealt with mental illness in their lives and identified as white. By the end of week one, the cast determined that our central character should be non-binary. We had also decided on our

driving dramatic question that would shape our devising going forward: “How do our stories meet?” We were probing the role of authenticity in how we form connections with others and how our individual, unique perspectives matter. If one is facing adversity in claiming their identity, how might this impact their ability to gain the most from friends, family, and life’s adventures? This dramatic question solidified the cast’s early impulses to form the play around a non-binary character.

Starting in week two, we began to create small vignettes with some of our favorite characters imagined during week one. To strip the ensemble of their own implicit obligation towards western theatrical storytelling, we created image theater based on Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed techniques and utilized Richard Schechner’s Rasaboxes exercises to explore breath and physical, gestural expressions of emotions to animate beyond the ensemble’s surgically masked faces. We also employed short-form improv games, such as Forward & Reverse, to try and keep our devising spontaneous and less mapped out. It was quite effective, as it helped the ensemble to instantaneously discover several fun and profound moments that both delighted and moved them. It also enabled them to think about the importance of non-verbal communication in developing a production for youth ages 4-9 that would not benefit from a live audience.

Beginning in week three, despite our previous work on physical, non-verbal storytelling, my cast began this new phase with an over-emphasis on text, dialogue, and narrative. They slipped into this focus due to their shared love of and habits from regularly participating in Dungeons & Dragons, a fantasy tabletop role-playing game predicated on elaborate subplots, mis-directions, and challenging antagonists who must be overcome by teamwork, creativity, strategy, and luck (dice often determine the level of success at each mini-crisis). We mapped out our

main character's arc, along with pivotal secondary characters (such as sidekicks and villain), deciding on a handful of key plot points. Our initial version of *Squiggles* was overly complicated. The entirety of week three was scene creation and constant scene shifting, so we could have a rough draft to perform for designers at the start of week four. It was not until the first ever run-through of the recently compiled script for our audience of designers that the ensemble realized how disjointed everything was; there were too many tertiary characters and scene changes to switch in and out of them. Ultimately, they recognized how the show's message focused on the adopted "villain" rather than on the non-binary character who was their impetus for creating the piece in the first place.

After that rough initial performance, the ensemble had an honest discussion about what worked and what did not. How were we going to answer our dramatic question using Sammy, the non-binary child character at the center of our story? We discussed different types of dramatic conflict and decided to remove the unnecessary focus on the antagonist, making the primary conflict be an internal one: Sammy versus self. We stripped away superfluous scenes, even if we loved the characters or bits we had created within them. To solve our time crunch concerns, as we had to present another run through by fourth week's end for our filming coordinator, we utilized sketch writing tactics of outlining shapes of scenes before improvising them. Eventually, our initial haphazard performance of 50+ minutes became a tightly woven 30-minute tale about a non-binary child, the inventor of Squiggle Land, who affirms by the show's conclusion their confidence to reveal their true identity to their parents.

During this process of devising, I was most impacted by the ensemble's ongoing practice of correctly identifying Sammy and their pronouns when discussing the script, giving performance notes, or

finessing staging. Those of us who identify as cisgender had misgendered Sammy at one point or another, slipping up and using incorrect pronouns. But the beauty was that we all stepped in, at different times, to gently correct one another in the moment. There was no guilt or force involved. And the burden of these polite corrections did not fall unevenly on our transgender cast member. It was a powerful, active, determined process of properly identifying someone, even if they were merely a fictional character.

A challenge to this beautiful effort to use Sammy's pronouns was the fact that a cisgender female actor portrayed our non-binary protagonist. It raised several questions about process that may not have been resolved by filming, but has informed my directing approaches going forward: Should we consistently use the pronouns/names of characters when giving blocking notes? Would the cisgender actress feel unseen in the process if we did so? How might trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people feel unseen in their daily lives because others do not employ their preferred pronouns?

Because our target audience was so young, we were fairly subtle in how we told Sammy's story. We utilized children's books about transgender youth *Call me Max* by Kyle Lukoff (2019) and *I am Jazz* by Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel (2014) as guideposts for how to create conversations around gender identity for the stage. While Sammy's non-binary identity may not have been entirely obvious to everyone watching the show, our audience left with an underlying message around mental health (as it related to Sammy's identity affirmation):

"Thank you for taking the time to make the play *Squiggles*. We learned to control our feelings and that we are bigger than them. We really like the emotions and the jellyfish. It was a wonderful play."

“We loved Sam 😊. I loved that show from you. Thank you for the show. It was beautiful. I loved it so much. I want to watch it again.”

“Thanks for the play. I loved it. Her imagination was big in Squiggle Land. Wish I was there in Squiggle Land. My favorite character is the girl that has a black umbrella. She had a nice accent.”

In just two weeks’ time, the ensemble crafted their tale into a nuanced look into how we all cope with negative feelings, how we can be good allies, and how we are always deserving of love and having fun.

Ultimately, the devised play *Squiggles* was about helping Sammy find their voice, speak their truth, and celebrate themselves. At the start of the show, they struggle to “express [their] feelings,” feel “powerless,” and “want to hide from the world.” But in the final scene, we see Sammy energetically greet their dog Rufus, telling of all the friends they made and tools they acquired to finally feel empowered to assert their authentic identity:

Sammy: Rufus! Let me tell you about my awesome time in Squiggle Land! These Squiggles (*silk ribbons*) help me find my place in the world without having to lie or hide, they were a gift from the wise and wonderful mermaid, Shellby. (*Rufus barks once.*) And this parasol is from Dame Victoria, destroyer of space dragons. It gives me extra power to fight my bad feelings away! (*Rufus barks twice.*) I got this vest that helps me express myself from this silly guy named Purple! (*Rufus howls.*) What’s that Rufus? You want me to put on the vest? (*Sammy puts the vest*) Wow, I really feel like myself! (Sound cue: Level Up sound; *Sammy takes off their hat.*) I think I’m ready to tell my parents ... to call me Sammy! (*Rufus licks them, they giggle, they run offstage*) C’mon.

This process helped the ensemble to find our creative storytelling voices, empowering us to respect individuals' preferred pronouns and appreciate each other's gifts as compassionate theatre-makers. Personally, it urged me to honor my own experiences with mis-gendering.

I am a white, middle-aged, cisgender woman who was born weighing 10 lb 14 oz and measuring 22.5" in length. I have always been tall and large. Growing up, it was difficult to develop a sense of style that would reaffirm or amplify my femininity. During my adolescent years, I wore primarily oversized t-shirts with jeans from the men's section of clothing stores. I never wore make-up and only ever had my hair in a ponytail. Some called me a tomboy. But I did not think this moniker fit. I just never knew how to dress my oversized female body, particularly when regular clothing stores rarely carried items in extended lengths or sizes. The way I dressed in these teen years informed my ambivalent sense of self and the way I carried myself, which led to being misgendered. A lot. And it upset me. But rarely did I ever correct anyone, as it was often strangers in passing or customers at work. "Thank you, sir." "Excuse me, young man." "He can't hear you, speak up." It was disheartening that these random people did not automatically see me as I saw myself. By not asserting my gender identity and correcting others' use of pronouns for me, it took me a long time to embrace my femininity, even though I have always embraced my identity as cisgender female. I know from personal experience that others' perceptions of you have nothing to do with who you know yourself to be and owning that can only improve one's mental well-being.

This belated insight from guiding the development of *Squiggles* has helped me to revisit my understanding of gender identity as it relates to myself and my students. It has aided me as an educator and director to develop even more empathy while stressing the importance of using a

person's pronouns to affirm, not negate, one's true self. Making our students feel seen and accepted is one of the simplest, most important jobs we have in higher education. Though, as seen with *Squiggles*, I hope that recognition starts much earlier.